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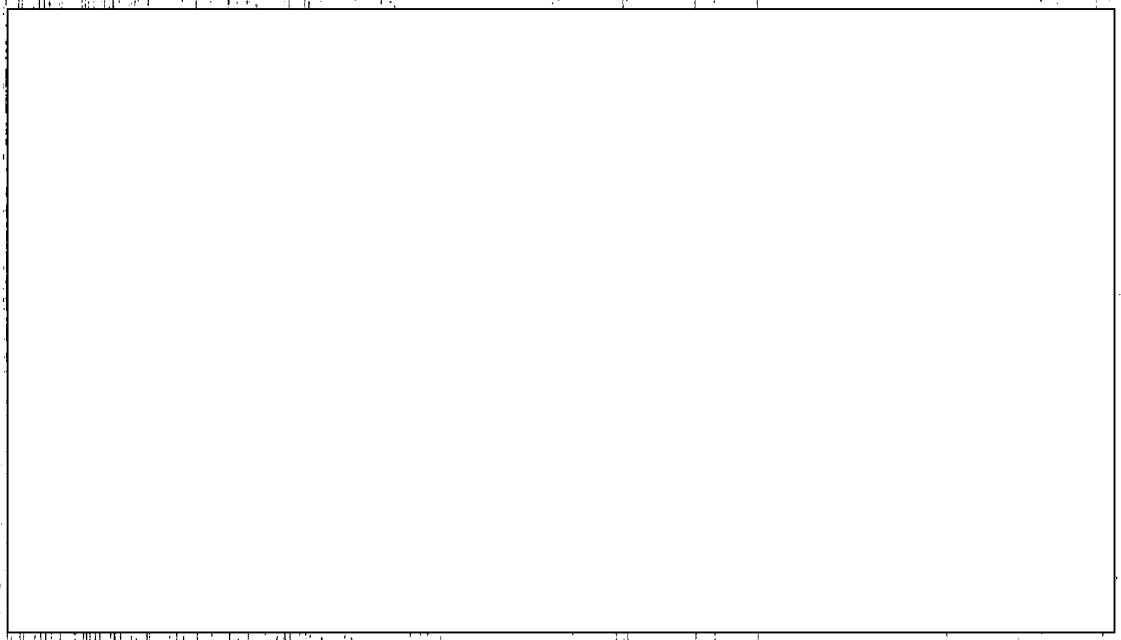

South Korea: Public Discussion of the Nuclear Option

Recent public discussion of the nuclear weapons option appears primarily designed to reassure the Korean people that Seoul is examining all necessary steps to strengthen the country's defenses. Additionally, it may be tailored to pressure the US to rethink plans for withdrawing troops and weapons from Korea. There is no reason to believe that it reflects a deepening government commitment to acquire nuclear weapons or to embark on any new research and development in direct support of such a goal.

The Statements

The current flurry of commentary regarding nuclear weapons dates from May 1977, when Foreign Minister Pak Tong-chin reportedly told the Korean press that Seoul "would corsider" weapons development if the US removed its tactical nuclear weapons from the South. Pak's remarks were followed by several reports that Korean professors were calling for an open mind on the nuclear option. In June 1977, the Foreign Minister reportedly told a National Assembly committee that although Seoul--a party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty--had no intention of acquiring nuclear weapons, a nation could, under special circumstances, develop such weapons to ensure its defense.

In March 1978, the liberal daily Tonga Ilbo reported that the National Unification Board, a government research organ, had published several academic papers supporting acquisition of nuclear weapons. Three months later a Haptong news dispatch reported that 89 percent of 200 university students polled hoped Korea would be armed with nuclear weapons. In August, the Tonga Ilbo and the independent Hanguk Ilbo editorialized that Seoul might have to consider nuclear weapons development.

While there is no evidence that Seoul deliberately inspired the comments by nonofficial sources, the government is certainly tolerant of the debate. In fact,

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the early remarks by Foreign Minister Pak probably were perceived by the press and academic community as a signal ending a taboo of several years on open treatment of the nuclear weapons issue.

Import of Statements

Public discussion of the nuclear option since early 1977 has been clearly tied to the US troop withdrawal issue. As a case in point, the first notable remark--that of Foreign Minister Pak in May 1977--was made at the time that former Undersecretary of State Philip Habib and former Chief of Staff George Brown went to Seoul to open negotiations on the terms of the withdrawal. Newspaper and academic commentary peaked following two press reports--one by the Washington Star in June 1977 and another by the Orient Press in August 1978--claiming that the US Congress was secretly informed in early 1977 that US tactical nuclear weapons would be withdrawn from Korea along with the ground troops.

Many officials in Seoul recognize the dangers that nuclear proliferation would pose, but the majority of the populace still reacts emotionally and superficially to the issue. They view the US nuclear umbrella as an important deterrent to war on the peninsula and tend to assume that the indigenous development of nuclear weapons may be needed to offset any potential weakening of the US security commitment.

By allowing or even encouraging the nuclear weapons debate, the government may believe that it can convince the Korean people that it is taking all necessary precautions to strengthen national defenses. Since the US troop withdrawal plan was announced, there has been a consistent pattern of increased government discussion--and deliberately exaggerated official optimism--regarding conventional weapons production capabilities in South Korea. President Pak Chong-hui himself initiated such morale-boosting talk in early 1977. At the same time, however, the President in this period has denied Korean interest in nuclear weapons.

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There are undoubtedly some members of the Korean Government who believe that the threat of "going nuclear" can be used as a lever against the US. That motivation appears to have figured partly in remarks made by some officials about the nuclear option four or five years ago. Then, the US Seventh Division had just been withdrawn from Korea, and officials in Seoul were already anticipating with heightened concern the possibility of the Second Division being withdrawn.

From the outset, Korean officials have hoped that the current withdrawal plan would be scrapped or significantly delayed. They may be reasoning that now--when the pace of withdrawal has been slowed and Seoul perceives that the plan is under fire in some quarters of Congress--the time is right to remind the US of the possible unpleasant consequences of reduced support for the South.

There is, however, no evidence that the current public discussion of the nuclear option reflects a government debate about actually acquiring nuclear weapons. Nor are there signs of new research and development activity in direct support of such a goal. Were Seoul truly to address the problem of developing nuclear weapons and to activate a clandestine research program, it would be unlikely to try to advertise that fact.

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